

Sammy Kominiarek, AMA volunteer 2019-2020

Walking Together

During my first week in Chaparral, New Mexico, I noticed that I was getting about 4,000 steps less than my daily goal of 10,000 steps on my Fit Bit Activity Tracker. Due to the dogs that roam the streets, the heat, and the toritos, which are little pricklers that get stuck in the bottom of my shoes, I have been driving everywhere and infrequently walking around. However, I have realized that I have been given the opportunity to walk with many people, although it is not the type of walking that I get credit for on my Fit Bit. Throughout my first month here, I have been accompanying people on their journeys by being present with them and walking alongside them.

The seventh graders at the middle school allow me to walk with them as they learn and grow. Many of them are learning English, just as I am learning Spanish. We learn more about these languages from each other. The students are twelve or thirteen-year-old teens and preteens, so they have the typical drama with friendships and relationships. When they invite me into these conversations about their personal lives, I feel touched to be able to listen and offer suggestions about handling different situations with love and kindness. My students have unique challenges too, such as living in Chaparral with relatives during the week to be able to go to school here and then returning to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on the weekends to be with their families. I am still learning about my role in the middle school, but I feel grateful to be able to show up for my students and walk with them as they learn about themselves and how precious having an education is for their lives.

The refugees at Annunciation House allow me to walk with them on a small part of their journey. This is a program in El Paso, TX that I have recently begun volunteering at where they combine the spirit of service and solidarity to accompany migrants through hospitality, advocacy, and education. During the Monday 6:00 am-2:00 pm shift at one of the Annunciation Houses, Casa Romero, I am present with the guests while we serve and eat meals together, welcome new refugees to the home, send guests to their sponsors in other parts of the United States with bags full of yummy snacks. I also notice the way that the refugees walk with each other. There is such a beautiful sense of solidarity in this house. The guests work together to cook their delicious meals, keep their space clean through shared chores, and are even eager to help me hang the clean laundry on the lines outside to dry. I know that when I return the following Monday, many of them will be in other parts of the country, but I will still hold them in my heart as we got to walk together for a short, but significant and beautiful time.

While this walking with others has been beautiful and meaningful, I have noticed that I have been left feeling a little lost and alone. I have wondered where I could seek support and who would want to join me on my personal journey. With the most perfect timing, Sister Nha Trang arrived! During our first meeting together, she said, "I am here to walk with you and accompany you throughout your year." I instantly felt a wave of peace wash over me. We also had the chance to go for a spiritual walk together to chat and watch the sunrise at the park (no wild dogs or

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toritos on the paved path here!). As we were walking together, she had us turn and walk around the loop from the opposite direction. Sister Nha Trang said that sometimes we actually need to turn ourselves around to notice life from a new perspective. I am thankful for this beautiful reminder.

I will continue to walk with the people here in Chaparral and El Paso on their journeys. Our time together makes me feel excited to learn and grow more. Additionally, I did become a member of Planet Fitness so that I can meet my step goal more often and have the space to exercise, which I believe is necessary for my physical and mental health. This time of movement allows me to process the events and interactions from the days with a clear mind. I feel hopeful to continuously discover more ways that I will be able to walk throughout this next year.

Maria Palacios, AMA volunteer 2015-2016

"I'm with the Purple People."

As I got off the plane, the first thing I noticed on the walls of the El Paso airport were pictures of folkloric dancers, Mexican food, bright colors and chihuahuas. Since my flight had arrived early, I was on the search for three ladies in white polos and purple skirts or as someone in Worcester called them, —"the purple people." Sister Chabela, Sister Evelyn, Sister Tere and Sister Diana greeted me with such a loving welcome and so much enthusiasm that I knew from that moment that I was in for a good time and good food.

I knew that Chaparral was in the desert and I was preparing myself for the heat, but boy, I was not expecting the sun to love me so much; its rays would shine extra bright that day. But the heat was put to the side once I set my eyes on the magnificent mountains that surround El Paso and continue into Chaparral. Seeing such beauty everywhere made me appreciate God's love for us through his creation. As we drove through Chaparral and as the sisters joked about their —downtown, I couldn't help but be reminded of my small pueblo in Mexico. I had not yet set foot on Chaparral soil but I already felt at home.

Leaving my mom behind was one of the hardest things I had to do and I was very upset during orientation as it got closer to my departure. The first few days I missed my mom so much that I began questioning my decision but at my welcome celebration that changed. If I was in awe by the beauty of the mountains and this new environment, I was not ready for the abundance of appreciation I would feel towards the community of Chaparral. That Friday, the leaders of the community arrived to welcome Idalia and me as the new AMAs and they were just so pleased and grateful to have us there that my doubt of being in Chaparral started to slowly vanish. That night Idalia received her AMA cross and was blessed by her mom. Though I tried to hold back my tears, I was a mess at that moment. All I could think of was my mom and how much I appreciated her. As I was asked to say a few words about my mom, the tears became waterfalls, and Idalia's mom turned to me and said, "Your mom might be far but you will find many moms here in Chaparral who will take care of you." Those few words sum up the embrace I have felt here from everyone.

From getting confused for a student at the Middle School where I help with ESL, to sneezing a thousand times from the allergies I suddenly developed here, to getting chased by chihuahuas on my run, to eating and chatting with the Sisters every lunch, to getting lost in Las Cruces, to volunteering at Catholic Charities, to getting outrun by elementary school kids, to eating endless nachos, to having intense reflections, to sharing my faith with my confirmation class, to crying, laughing, reflecting, praying, learning and loving, I would not change a single thing from my first month here in Chaparral, New Mexico!

